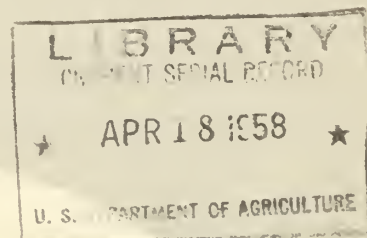


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A FORMULA FOR MORE EFFICIENT READING

a guide
for employees of
the U. S. Department
of Agriculture,

The S-P-D Approach

Miscellaneous Publication No. 753

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE,
Office of Personnel, Washington, D. C.

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Issued April 1958



A FORMULA FOR MORE EFFICIENT READING

A GUIDE FOR EMPLOYEES
OF THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

This pamphlet has been written to help you increase your **READING EFFICIENCY**—to help you learn to get from the printed page what you *want or need* with as little waste of your time and energy as possible.

You can improve your reading efficiency in three ways:

1. By increasing your reading rate

By reading rate we mean the speed with which you accurately “see” and understand the words and ideas the author wants to communicate to you.

2. By being more flexible in your reading

By reading differently the great variety of things we must read each day. *The way you read, how fast you read, and how thoroughly you read* depend on such things as:

- ▶ Why you are reading
- ▶ How well written it is
- ▶ How long it is
- ▶ How difficult it is
- ▶ How important it is
- ▶ How much you already know, etc.

3. By breaking poor reading habits

Habits like passive reading, daydreaming, lack of concentration, unnecessary rereading, and other wasteful habits.

You can increase your reading efficiency at once by being more flexible and breaking wasteful habits. This enables you to cover much more reading matter in much less time. But increasing your reading rate or reaction time to print is more complex. It requires consistent and systematic *guided* practice with carefully selected and prepared materials. These may include such me-

chanical learning aids as rapid exposure devices, pacing machines, and specially designed training films. Although substitutions may be made successfully in the use of most of these learning aids in a well-organized course, there is no substitute for a well-trained, interested, and motivating instructor.

If you cannot locate a good instructor or take a formal course, you can still save a great deal of time by applying the principles and techniques outlined in this pamphlet and by using a self-help type workbook. You will find several listed at the end of this pamphlet. Whether you enroll in a reading course or work at it on your own, here are a few reminders about learning.

Only you can learn. No one can learn for you. Furthermore, you learn by doing. A teacher or training course can only motivate you, encourage you, guide you, show you shortcuts, and help you profit from the learning experiences of others.

To learn:

1. *You must be active.* Mentally active or physically active. Preferably both.
2. *You must change.* Your way of thinking or acting must change. Again preferably both. You may learn the principles of more efficient reading “by heart,” but if you do not apply them, you will not increase your reading efficiency.

So, before proceeding, resolve to apply the principles outlined on the following pages conscientiously and consistently.

Apply them for a week or two and you will be amazed at how much time and effort you can save.

How Important Is Reading to You?

Today more of us do more reading than ever before. We do more reading to—

- ▶ Get jobs
- ▶ Hold jobs
- ▶ Get promotions

as well as to keep informed on local, national, and international events. Consequently most of us read newspapers, memos, correspondence, instructions, directives, advertisements, reports, magazines, and a wide variety of related materials.

A few years ago a surgical dressings firm in Chicago surveyed its management personnel to see how much time their employees spent reading daily. They averaged 4½ hours a day.

At about the same time a New York engineering firm asked its employees to estimate how much time they spent reading. They averaged 37½ hours a week for both on-the-job and off-the-job reading.

In the Pentagon, the Air Force conducts a 30-hour reading improvement course for its officers and upper grade civilians. Officers and key civilians from the Army, Navy, and the Office of the Secretary of Defense are also enrolled in this course. For more than 2 years these volunteer "students" have been asked to estimate how much time they spend *reading on the job* each day. More than 1,500 of them averaged 4 hours daily.

More recently 168 officials of the Department of Agriculture who enrolled in the reading improvement course in Washington were asked to estimate how much time they spent daily in reading *both on and off the job*. The earlier findings were repeated. The employees estimated an average of slightly more than 4½ hours daily.

This is a lot of reading. With all of the reading we adults do you might logically conclude that we must be good readers. Let us take a look.

How Well Do Adults Read?

Dr. Nila Smith, Director of New York University's Reading Institute, has said that most of us in this Jet Age still read at a horse-and-buggy rate. We are operating at about 20 percent of our reading capacity. Universities and adult reading improvement centers consistently report that most adults are slow and inflexible readers, plagued with many inefficient reading habits. Some investigators even claim that most adults read only as well as the typical seventh or ninth grade school child.

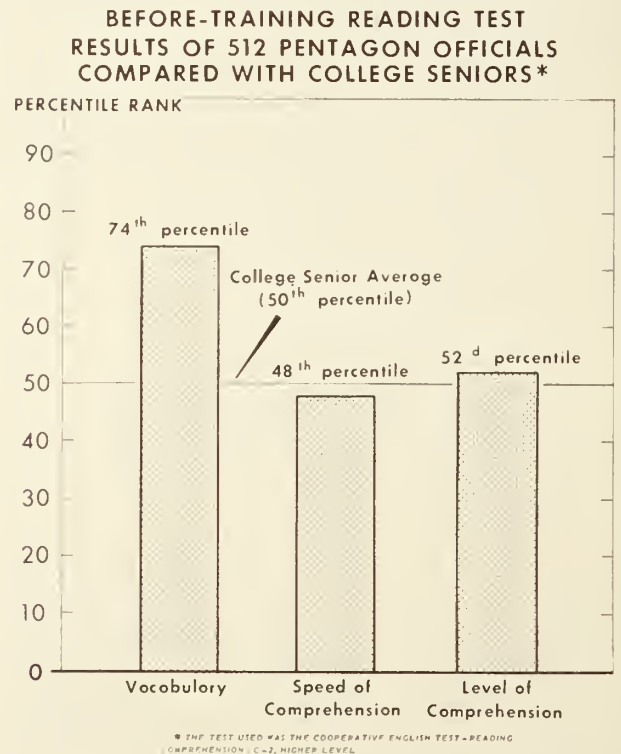
While the results of research at the Air Force Reading Laboratory and at the Department of Agriculture have not been this dismal, the results of reading tests administered to these select Air Force, Army, and Navy officers and civilians have been revealing.

Let us look at some actual before-training test results. The chart opposite shows how 512 Pentagon officers and civilians of similar rank, age, and educational background performed on a standardized reading test.

You will note that the average *vocabulary* score of the people tested was well above the average of college seniors. In *speed of comprehension* their average was slightly below the average of college seniors. In *level or depth of comprehension* they were somewhat above college senior average. The same profile of scores was found among more than 168 higher grade officials of the Department of Agriculture.

Although these averages do not seem too far out of line, a closer look at the individual test results shows an almost unbelievable variation.

To point this out more dramatically let us look



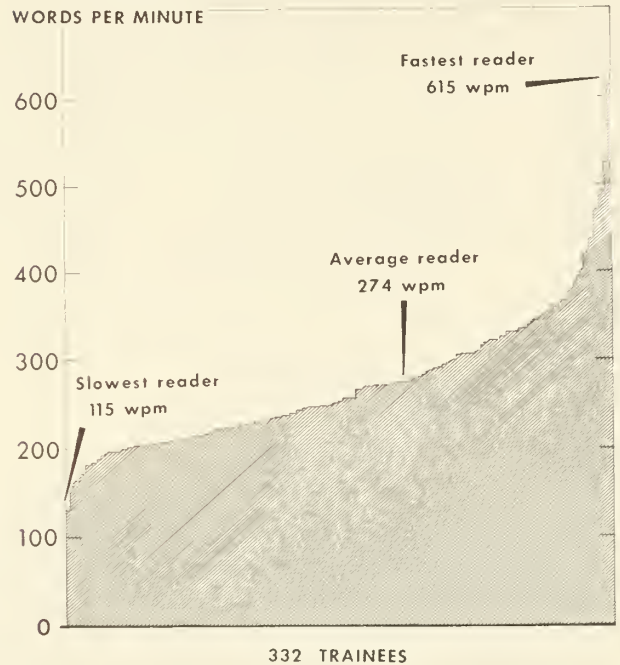
at the next graph. It shows before-training test results of 332 Department of Agriculture and Pentagon officers and civilians. The test consisted of a 2,000-word, fairly easy (ninth-grade level) and interesting magazine article, which they read while being timed. After reading the article they were asked to answer 10 multiple-choice questions about the contents of the article.

As a group they read the article at only 274 words a minute. This is not much faster than they would read more difficult technical or study-type material.

But notice how much they vary. The fastest reader read at 615 words a minute, 500 words a minute faster than the slowest who read at 115 words a minute. Not only do they vary in reading rate, but also in what they comprehend. As a group they answered 8 out of 10 questions correctly. Some answered all 10 questions correctly and several answered only 2 or 3 correctly. It may seem hard to believe but the fastest readers tend to understand as well or even better than the slowest.

At the Department of Agriculture it was found that the fastest 10 percent of those enrolled in the reading improvement course read more than 2½ times faster than the slowest 10 percent and had higher average comprehension scores. This was true both before training and after training. Furthermore, after only 30 hours of guided practice and training the majority of those enrolled read 70 to 80 percent faster at the end of the course than before. Many were able to double their read-

**BEFORE-TRAINING READING RATE SCORES OF
332 DEPT. OF AGRICULTURE AND PENTAGON
OFFICERS AND CIVILIAN OFFICIALS***



* THE TEST USED WAS THE PERCEPTUAL DEVELOPMENT LABORATORY'S INC. TEST BN-5101

ing rates and some even tripled their speed with about the same or better comprehension.

At this point you may be wondering why such highly select groups of adults read so slowly and vary so much in reading ability. Let us look into some of the reasons.

Some Causes of Inefficient Reading

I. A Complex Process

Reading is perhaps the most highly abstract and complex process society requires us to do. It is hard to learn and hard to teach.

II. Inadequate Training

For most of us formal reading training stopped at about the sixth grade.

III. Inappropriate Training

At about the sixth grade, teacher noticed that most of us could call off the words quite well when asked to read aloud, so she simply told us to read silently without moving our lips.

We might say then that *oral* reading was stressed and from the sixth grade on most of us were on our own to develop *silent* reading skills as best we could. Most of us developed many poor reading habits. A few of us stumbled onto faster silent-reading habits by accident or

through the timely assistance of a good teacher or two along the way.

IV. Too Much Technical Reading

To make matters worse the great bulk of reading done by most of us has been study or technical types of reading, which are necessarily slow and laborious.

Many engineers, economists, lawyers, mathematicians, doctors, and scientists are slow and exacting readers. That in itself is not necessarily bad, but they also tend to read everything in about the same way. They can slow down when they have to, but few can speed up when the occasion permits. Some actually feel guilty when they skim or try to read faster.

V. Lack of Attempt to Improve

A final reason for slow inflexible reading is that few, if any, of us have ever made a serious and

systematic effort to improve our reading efficiency and abilities.

This pamphlet is designed to help you start that serious, systematic attempt to improve your reading. Remember, however, all this pamphlet can do for you is point the way. You have to do the learning. But you can be assured that a little effort now can pay big dividends in *time saved*, *new ideas*, and *personal enjoyment*.

In the next section we will describe a formula or approach to everyday and job types of reading. This formula or approach to reading has been used successfully by hundreds of people. Almost without exception they claim it has saved them time, increased their general on-the-job and off-the-job reading efficiency, and helped them to concentrate better and get more out of their reading.

It can do the same for you.

The S-P-D Approach



Earlier we pointed out that most of the reading we do is informational and related to our jobs. H. Judson and K. P. Baldridge in their book, *Techniques of Reading*, call this type of reading "practical prose." It consists of the piles of reading materials that overwhelm us daily—materials we read or *should* read to do our jobs and keep informed. Some of it is well written; more of it is poorly written. Almost all of it is difficult to read.

The S-P-D formula is a general approach or technique for processing and reading practical prose.

Before we examine this formula let us review a few facts about the organization and construction of practical prose. To begin with most well-written practical prose has three parts. Whether it is a textbook, a chapter, or a magazine article, it normally has:

- ▶ An introduction
- ▶ A development of the topic or idea
- ▶ A conclusion, summary, or ending

The S-P-D approach is designed to help you find out quickly what the author has to say and how he has organized his material to say it. The formula will help you get a bird's-eye view of the author's message.

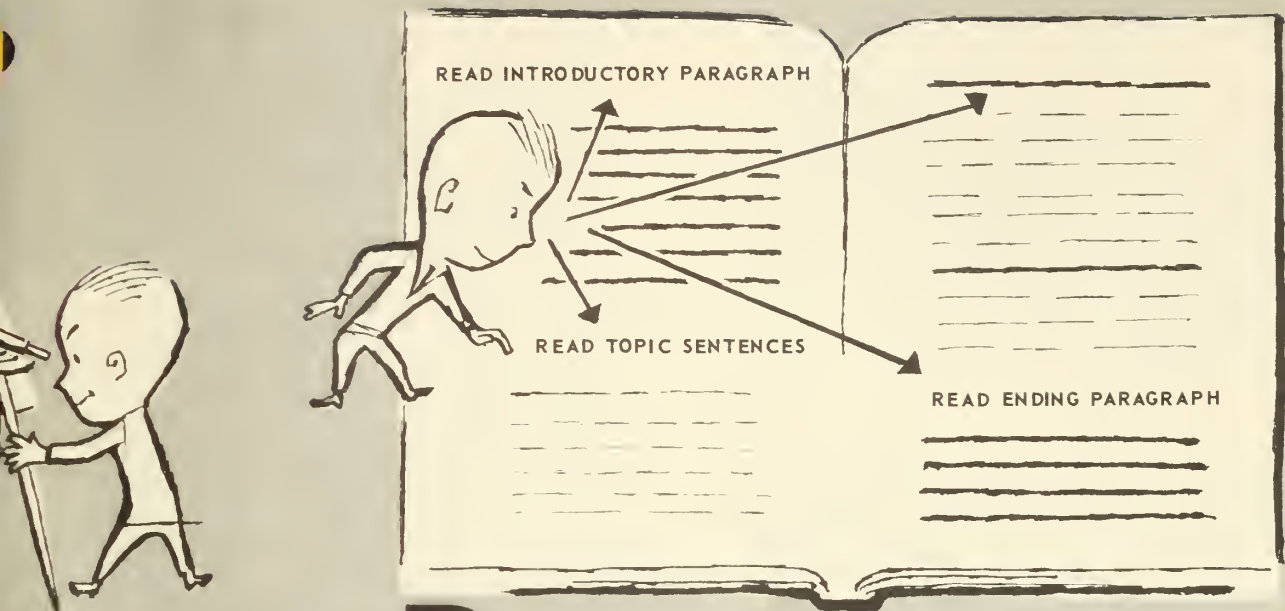
Many readers, especially slow readers, suffer from mind wandering, lack of concentration, and lack of understanding. In part their difficulty is preoccupation with words rather than with ideas. They fail to see the author's main ideas and the relationships between them. You might say that their eyes feed their minds too slowly and in piecemeal. They get lost in detail and fail to "see the forest for the trees."



SURVEY

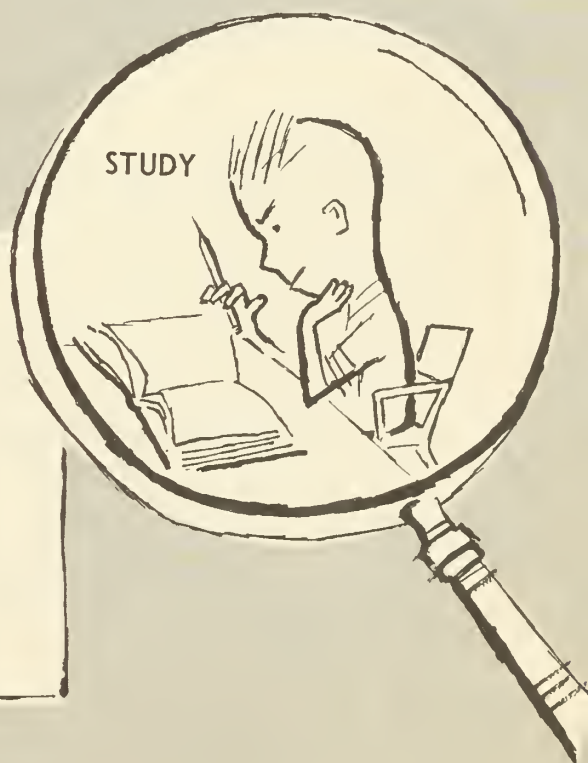


DECIDE



P

REREAD



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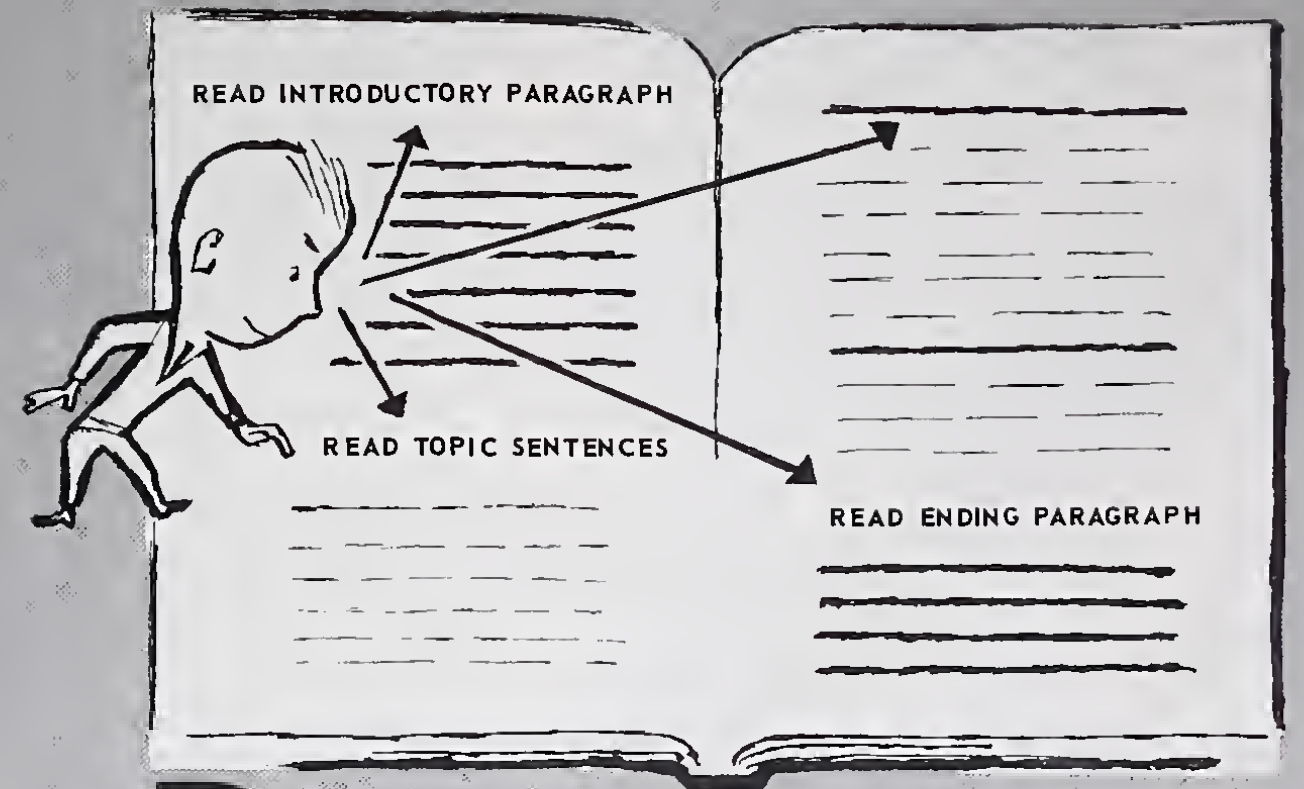
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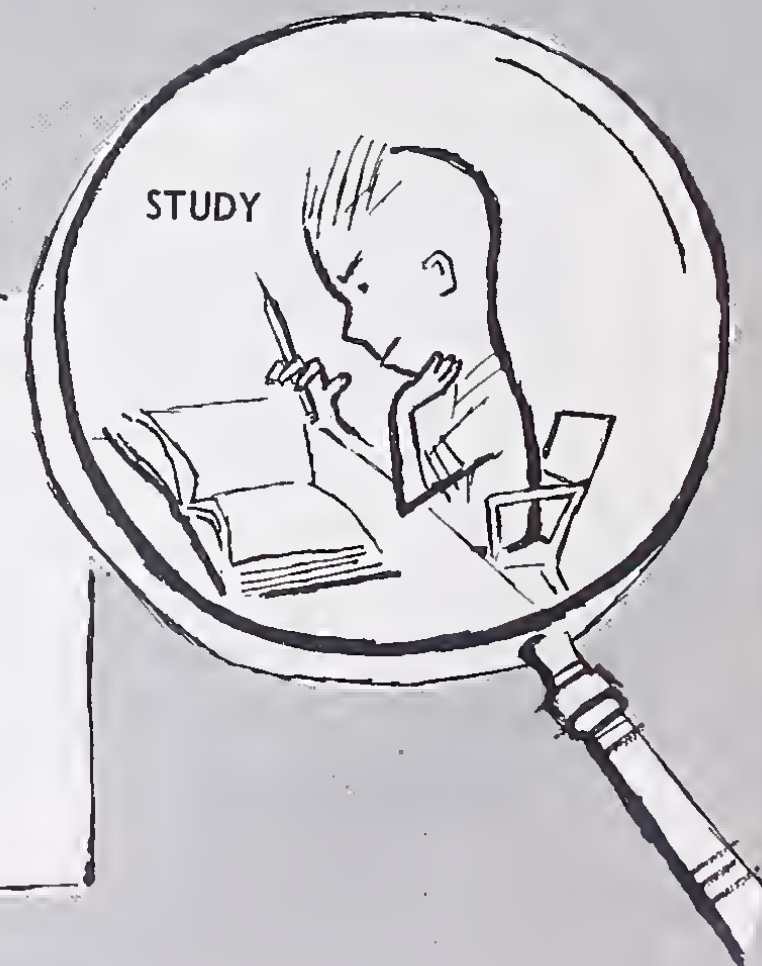
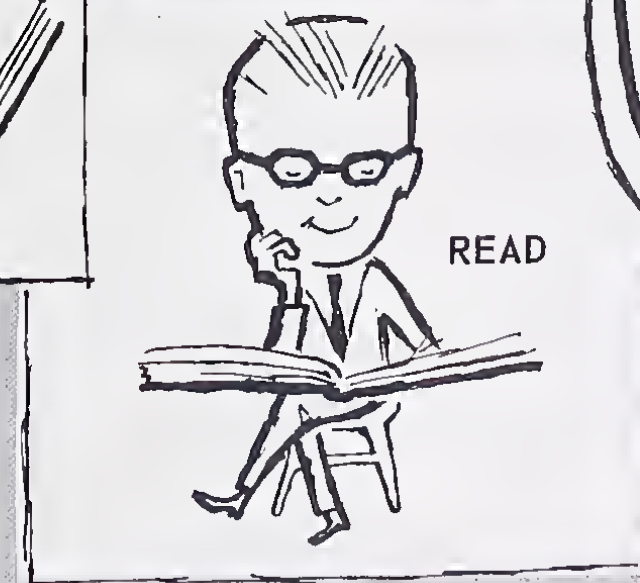
SURVEY



PRE-READ



DECIDE



The S-P-D approach will help you learn to read ideas rather than words. It will help you become more mentally active in your reading—more selective and discriminating. It will help you concentrate better and remember more of what you read.

This sounds like a great deal to promise but these are not empty claims. They are actually toned-down, unsolicited testimonials received from hundreds of adults who have applied this approach to their reading during the past few years.

Now, let us look at the S-P-D approach in detail. "S" stands for *Survey*, "P" stands for *Pre-read*,¹ and "D" stands for *Decide*. Here are the steps:

S—Survey: Your first step in attacking any practical prose is to *size up the task ahead* and *define your purpose* for reading. You should ask yourself: What is all this about? Who wrote it? When? Why am I reading it? How long is it? How is it organized? What are its parts and subparts? Where are the introduction, the body, the ending? At the same time look for illustrations, graphs, tables and clues to the author's style and the types of paragraphs he constructs. If the author has written a summary, you may want to read this *first*.

P—Preread: Let us say you are reading a short article, one you have surveyed and prepared yourself for reading, tentatively identifying the three main parts—the introduction, the body, and the ending. Your next steps are:

1. Read the introduction (first paragraph or two) rapidly.
2. Read the first sentence *only* of each succeeding paragraph until you reach the last paragraph or two. (Well-written paragraphs usually have a "main idea" sentence called the topic sentence. While the topic sentence may be located anywhere in the paragraph, most often it is the first sentence.)
3. Read the last paragraph or two rapidly.

At this point you should have a rather good outline of the author's message. Now—

D—Decide: Several courses of action are open to you:

1. *Skip*—You may find that the article is not what you want. You may skip it or leave it unread.

¹For more details on the technique of prereading see H. Judson and K. P. Baldridge, *The Techniques of Reading*. New York: Harcourt Brace Co. 1954.

2. *Skim*—You may decide that it contains a fact, name, date, or idea you can use. Your next step is to skim or let your eyes pass quickly over the print to locate what you want.

3. *Read*—You may decide that the article is important enough to read. If so return to the beginning and read it thoroughly to fill in the ideas you missed in your pre-reading.

4. *Study*—Finally you may decide that much of the article is worth remembering. You might then adopt a number of learning techniques such as underlining important ideas, making marginal notes, reciting to yourself, rereading parts, and even outlining the ideas or summarizing orally or in writing what you have read.

For a time you will have to perform each step consciously. You may feel that you are not comprehending as well as you should. This, too, is natural. Until this approach becomes more or less automatic with you, your comprehension might be adversely affected because of your preoccupation with the steps involved in the approach rather than the ideas in the article you are reading. Gradually, with continued application of the approach, you will find yourself understanding not only as much but more of what you read.

Now let us review the steps of the S-P-D approach:

1. S—Survey

Size up the material to be read. Make sure you know why you are reading and have some notion of what you hope to learn.

2. P—Preread

- a. Read first paragraph rapidly and fully.
- b. Shift to reading first sentence only of following paragraphs.
- c. Read the last paragraph fully.

3. D—Decide to

- a. Skip
- b. Skim
- c. Read
- d. Study

Remember to keep your purpose for reading in mind. You may accomplish your objective at any point in the approach. Once you have obtained what you want or need, further time spent reading may be wasted.

The S-P-D approach as just outlined may be used effectively in reading almost all practical prose. In general the longer and more difficult the material to be read, the more the approach can help you.

In summary, the S-P-D approach is designed to help you become a more efficient, more active and more flexible reader. It is designed to help you read for a purpose and proceed in the most efficient way to accomplish your purpose. Some materials you will want to skip altogether. With other materials a rough idea of the contents may be all you need. Finally, some materials you will want to understand thoroughly and perhaps commit to memory.

Remember, however, the S-P-D approach is not a cure-all, but it can save you time and effort. At

first you may resist using it. This is natural, for we are creatures of habit. Applying the S-P-D approach means breaking old and well-established habits, and that is never easy!

In the next few pages an illustration will be given on how the S-P-D approach might be applied to several common types of reading material—professional and trade journals, news magazines, and technical and text-type books.

If you are currently reading any of these, first read the steps suggested and then practice applying the procedure until it becomes automatic.

Applying the S-P-D Approach

READING PROFESSIONAL AND TRADE JOURNALS

You have just seen how the S-P-D approach may be applied to a short article. With very little modification you can just as quickly and efficiently get what you want or need from a chapter, an entire book, a staff report, a trade or professional journal, a newsmagazine, newspapers and related materials. By way of example, let us examine the steps we might take in applying the S-P-D approach to the efficient reading of a professional or trade journal.

Professional and trade journals vary a great deal in size, organization and quality. They may range from a newsletter to a very scholarly publication. They are written to report on current research and recent developments to help keep you up to date.

Unfortunately, many authors write in a highly stilted fashion to impress their colleagues rather than to communicate with them. Thus this type of practical prose is often time-consuming and difficult to read.

Your first step in approaching one of these journals is to learn something of its purpose and organization. Many journals devote most of their space to report and research articles contributed by members. A less formal section dealing with personal and general interest articles is also common. A section of book reviews may also be included.

Most of the journals have a policy that requires contributors to follow a more or less rigid format. Often a summary must be included. Sometimes it precedes the article.

To operate most efficiently, first examine the table of contents, checking the most interesting or important articles. Decide on a tentative order of priority to follow in getting what you want or need from the journal within the limited time that you have.

Then apply the S-P-D formula. Turn to your first selection and:

S—Survey:

Size up the article. What is it about? Why are you reading it? How long is it? How is it organized? Where are the introduction, the development, the conclusion or ending? If there is a summary read this *first*.

P—Preread:

1. Read the introduction (first paragraph or two) rapidly.
2. Shift to reading topic sentences only (usually the first sentence) until you reach the last paragraph or two (the conclusion).
3. Read the last paragraph or two rapidly. Now—

D—Decide:

1. *Skip* it if it is not what you expected or what you want at this time and proceed to your second selection.
2. *Skim*—If the article contains tables, charts and graphs you might profit by quickly examining these or other sections and paragraphs about which you may be curious. Or you may decide to . . .
3. *Read*—If appropriate go back to the beginning and read the article completely.
4. *Study*—Finally, if you decide that most of the article is worth remembering you might examine it more critically and intensively, underlining, making marginal notes, reciting to yourself and summarizing, depending on your purpose or need.

After you have covered the most important articles in this fashion you might want to browse through the rest of the journal surveying, skimming, skipping, and studying as your interest and time dictate.

The next section of this pamphlet offers some suggestions on how you might apply the principles of the S-P-D approach to news magazines.

READING NEWS MAGAZINES

The S-P-D approach can be applied almost exactly as just described to news magazines. Few people read news magazines efficiently—partly because the index may be hard to find. Once you find it (usually it is within the first 20 pages) keep your finger there to keep from wasting more time in referring to it.

Learn the organization and content of the magazine. Some classify or group the information they contain by topics, such as foreign news, national affairs, science, medicine, business, letters, etc. Your first step then is to know your major interests and proceed accordingly, reading the sections in the order of their importance or interest to you, applying the S-P-D principles.

Once you have satisfied your major interests you might browse with any time remaining—skipping, skimming, reading, and even rereading as your needs and interests dictate.

READING TECHNICAL AND TEXT-TYPE BOOKS

Now let us apply the S-P-D principles on a still larger dimension—the efficient reading of a technical or text-type book.

Again your primary consideration is to define your goal or purpose for reading. Once you have decided why you are reading, your approach to the reading situation should be designed to get what you need or want with as little waste of your time and effort as possible.

Quite often new books have a paper jacket or “dust” cover. On one inside flap you will often find a short sketch about the author. On the other flap you may find a few words about the book. By all means read both of these first.

Next turn to the table of contents and examine it to detect what ground the author has decided to cover and how he has organized his ideas. Additional information about the author’s purpose and the limitations he has placed upon his treatment of the topic is usually explained in the introduction or other prefatory material. Unfortunately, many people skip or glide over this material in their eagerness to do what they consider the “real” reading. Actually the table of contents, preface, and introductory materials are far more important to understanding than most people realize. They help you decide how important the book is likely to be to you and how thoroughly you will want to read it. They also provide per-

spective and a framework or outline of the author’s ideas.

Seeing the total picture is vital for adequate understanding and appreciation of what the author is trying to convey to us. Just as a painting is more than the sum of individual brush marks so, too, a book, a chapter, or short article is more than the sum of the individual words that go into its construction. It takes on full meaning only when we see those words in relationship to other words to form ideas, and ideas in relationship to other ideas to complete the printed message.

The longer and the more difficult the printed selection, the harder it is to see the total picture, and the easier it is to become preoccupied and lost in detail. Thus the S-P-D approach or a modification of it is especially helpful in reading long reports, technical books and other study-type materials.

Let us again outline the steps:

S—Survey:

Read the jacket information, the table of contents, and all other prefatory material. Identify: (1) The introductory chapter or chapters, (2) The body of the book or the chapters that develop the author’s thesis, and (3) His concluding chapter or section. Keep your purpose for reading actively in mind.

P—Preread:

Next preread the entire book by:

1. Prereading the introductory chapter as you would a short article. (Read first paragraph or two, shift to reading topic sentences of the succeeding paragraphs until you reach the final paragraph or two, which you should read fully but rapidly.)
2. Read the introductory and concluding paragraphs of each additional chapter glancing briefly at the development of each chapter until you reach the final chapter.
3. Preread the final chapter as you did the introductory chapter. At this point you should have a fairly good idea of the author’s views.

D—Decide:

1. *Skip*—You may decide the rest is not worth reading.
2. *Skim*—You may decide to read only selected chapters or parts of the book. If so proceed to each chapter and preread, skip, skim, read or study, depending on how much information you want. On the other hand you may decide to read the whole book. If so, then . . .

3. *Read*—Go back to the first chapter, pre-read it, then read it fully. Follow the same procedure with each chapter until you finish the book. As you start each chapter you may find it helpful to turn to the table of contents to review its relationship to preceding and following chapters and its contribution to the total picture.
4. *Study*—If fuller understanding and retention are desired, the learning aids described earlier may be used to master important ideas, sections, or chapters.

You might, for example, spend a few moments trying to summarize the main message of the book. Or you may want to construct a more or less detailed outline. Or you may wish to make marginal notes or underline key ideas

for future reference. Or you may wish to apply any combination of the above.

Naturally, you may accomplish your objective or purpose at any point in the approach. Once you have gotten what you need, further reading is unnecessary unless your purpose has changed in the interim.

You will note that the S-P-D approach applied to a book is the same as that applied to a short article except that the steps apply to chapters instead of paragraphs.

The approach need not be followed religiously to produce results. The important thing is that you approach every reading situation actively, asking yourself: Why am I reading this? What information do I need? How can I get what I want or need without wasting time and effort? Then proceed accordingly.

Your Next Step

Your next step is a crucial one. It was mentioned earlier that this pamphlet was designed to help you improve your efficiency when reading practical prose.

Remember that novels, poetry and other creative writing you read for relaxation, escape, and pleasure should be read in any manner that yields the desired results. By way of illustration, you certainly would not want to apply the S-P-D approach to reading a mystery unless you just can't wait to find out "Who done it."

Your next step then is to apply the S-P-D approach to all the practical prose you read from now on. Avoid the wasteful habit of reading everything word for word, passively starting with the first sentence and plodding compulsively through to the end.

- Have a purpose in mind, and
- Proceed in the most efficient way to get what you want from your reading.

If you want to increase your reading rate, to learn to read in word groups instead of word for word, and to get more information about how to read different things in different ways, look up one of the self-help type workbooks listed below.

If you think you have a serious problem with reading, vocabulary, vision, or concentration, contact your nearest college or university for information and help.

Chances are you do a great deal of reading. A small investment in time and effort *now* can pay handsome dividends in time saved, new ideas, and enjoyment for the rest of your life.

It is up to you!

Selected Self-Help Workbooks

Brown, J. I. *Efficient Reading* (Alternate Edition).

Boston: D. C. Heath Co., 1956. Price: \$3. Contains 66 reading practice exercises plus vocabulary self-tests on each. Ten multiple choice questions are included for checking comprehension. Charts for converting reading time into words per minute, and a key to the answers are included with spaces for recording scores made on each selection.

Cosper, R., and Griffin, E. G. *Toward Better Reading Skill*.

New York: Appleton Century Crofts, Inc., 1953. Price: \$1.75. Contains 26 reading practice exercises plus 4 equated tests for indicating progress. Like the previously mentioned workbook it also includes questions, answers, time charts, and space for recording scores made.

Judson, H., and Baldrige, K. P. *The Techniques of Reading*.

New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1954. Price: \$3.50 softbound; \$4.75 hard cover. Contains information on the principles and techniques of better reading and vocabulary development. Also contains practice exercises with questions, answers, time charts and space for recording scores made.

Leedy, P. D. *Reading Improvement for Adults*. New

York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1956. Price: \$5.95. Similar to the previously mentioned book by Judson and Baldrige, this book contains both practice reading exercises and information on reading principles and techniques. Again, time charts, answers, and space for recording scores are provided.

A FINAL NOTE

The S-P-D formula has been developed to serve as a guide in solving some of your reading and communicating problems.

Like a mathematical formula, the S-P-D formula can only serve as a guide in thinking out or decoding the meanings the author intended. It is not a substitute for thinking, but a guide to thinking while reading.

It can help you decide *what* to read and *how* thoroughly. But only *you* can do the selecting and evaluating of what you read.

"Some books are to be tasted ; others swallowed ; and some few to be chewed and digested."—Bacon.